

Education Template:

Eight Steps to a Successful Conservation Education Program

Second Edition: Soil and Water Quality Program

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8 Steps to Educational Success:

1. Create an Education Committee
2. Identify Education Priorities
3. Identify Target Audience for Each Priority
4. Characterize Each Target Audience
5. Establish Measurable Objectives
6. Design Effective Educational Activities
7. Determine Constraints to Success
8. Implement and Evaluate Progress

INTRODUCTION

Indiana's Soil and Water Conservation Districts (SWCDs) are sub-units of state government responsible for soil and water conservation programs within all 92 Indiana county boundaries (Indiana Code Title 14, Article 32). Districts inform and educate citizens about conserving soil and water and related natural resources. Responsibilities include addressing soil and water conservation activities for rural non-agricultural, agricultural, and urban (cities and towns) land. For more than 60 years, local conservation history, conservation efforts and activities have increased in scale and scope. The primary focus of the District remains on the voluntary adoption of a variety of best management practices for soil and water conservation by citizens. The client audience is expanding beyond the initial scope of agriculture. Fortunately, county financial and human resource assistance allow the District and Cooperative Extension Service professionals to cooperate in education programs for this expanded audience and the emerging soil and water concerns of the county.

PRIMARY FOCUS

The primary focus of the District's information and education work is three-fold:

1. Direct and focus concerns of citizens, landowners, users, and public officials regarding existing and future soil and water capabilities and management problems. Show property owners and homeowners how land use practices impact economics, soil and water quality, and other natural resources for present and future generations.
2. Inform and educate citizens with existing or pending soil erosion and water quality problems about available options that can deter or correct the problem(s). Motivate land users, homeowners, and public officials to choose, finance, and implement a variety of best management practices through soil and water conservation education programs.

3. Heighten the awareness and importance of on-site erosion and sediment control and water quality improvement through local, regional and state events to achieve necessary conservation actions and activities.

A clear strategy for marketing and information is necessary for a District's successful Annual Plan of Work. Steps in fulfilling this strategy include:

1. Create an information and education committee.
2. Identify soil and water conservation education priorities.
3. Identify target audiences.
4. Characterize target audience.
5. Establish measurable objectives.
6. Design effective informational and educational activities.
7. Determine constraints to success and remove barriers.
8. Evaluate progress.

Following is a brief description of each of the steps.

STEP 1. CREATE AN INFORMATION AND EDUCATION COMMITTEE

Soil and Water Conservation Districts are the primary organization for local soil and water conservation issues. Every event and activity must educate citizens about soil and water conservation and stewardship. Working with local governing agencies and community organizations is critical for success. Forming an information and education committee requires planning, execution, and follow-through.

The process starts with listing all people that benefit from or contribute to the success of conservation and/or education in the District. This core group could be a SWCD supervisor, staff member, associate supervisor, Purdue University Cooperative Extension Service Educator, NRCS and IDNR Soil Conservation staff, a member of the District Capacity Building Team (Purdue Agronomy Soil Conservation Programs Specialist or IDNR Conservation Program Specialist)¹.

To build support with local communities, send invitations to current local agriculture and related business leaders, contractors, local agriculture organizations who do conservation or related education programs, conservation clubs and organizations, school groups, solid waste district manager, County Commissioners, County Council members, service clubs, Economic Development Board members, Local Area Planning Commission members, Local Board of Zoning Appeals members, and the Chamber of Commerce. District Supervisors may advise adding additional people to the list based on assessment of local soil and water conservation needs.

The Soil and Water Conservation District Chairman will appoint one supervisor or associate supervisor to actively participate on the committee and should serve as committee chairman. The District staff and watershed coordinator should participate on the committee. It is not necessary for every staff member to participate as workloads merit. People invited to participate may respond positively with a verbal invitation. However, a formal letter from the District Chairman provides tangible communication.

¹ Formerly referred to as Clean Water Indiana Education Specialists and INDR Program Directors.

This process may take several weeks. This is a process, not a single event. The first letter solicits a response from the people contacted and includes detailed information regarding the date, time and location of the orientation meeting. Mail this letter two to four weeks before the meeting. Recipients not responding should receive a courtesy follow-up telephone call to confirm their attendance at the first meeting. Keep the list of those who decline for future reference. They may join the committee at a later date because of a previous calendar conflict for this first meeting. The initial group may be large. Consider organizing a small group with rotating membership. Members could serve two years then move off when they secure a suitable replacement to fill their seat. This allows for continued growth of the committee.

The orientation meeting must be brief and informational, with a specific start and end time. This is an opportunity to increase awareness and urgency. Plan time for introductions. The preferred method is by name and organization. The Conservation Program Specialist or other supporting staff has additional methods of opening an orientation meeting. Ask them for ideas.

Give proper attention to the number of meetings necessary, time commitment, and organization of the committee when preparing to host this meeting. No one likes to meet just to meet. Be respectful of the professional time committee members are contributing to these conservation meetings. Packets containing the District's Annual Plan of Work and Long Range Plan, past education programs, photos or slides of existing soil erosion and water quality problems in the community, a copy of the District's Annual Plan of Work results from locally-led meetings, surveys, and funding are helpful. Additional materials from other organizations may be beneficial to the committee, and can be included in this packet. Have enough information packets for members attending. A few extra can be handy when others need information. As a large group, ask participants to list two to four soil and water or natural resource issues they feel need attention in the community. Record these either on a tear sheet easel or whiteboard. Appoint one person to keep a written record or minutes of the meeting. Finally, set a date and time for the next committee meeting if it is not in the District's Annual Plan of Work or regular calendar.

STEP 2. IDENTIFY SOIL AND WATER EDUCATION PRIORITIES

Send a reminder notice or email a few days before the second meeting. This is a good time to remind everyone about the priorities gathered at the first meeting. These priorities may reflect the soil and water conservation resource concerns in the District's Annual Plan of Work and Long Range Plan.

At this meeting the meeting coordinator or facilitator can easily cover steps 2 through 5. Reassess the priorities from the previous meeting. Quickly add any new ideas committee members bring. Do not spend much time here. List other organizations that do conservation education in the county and their events or activities. This may include the local chapter of the Indiana Farm Bureau, a 4-H Safe Shooting Sports Club, Pheasants Forever, The Nature Conservancy, the Chamber of Commerce, or a school science club. Include as many groups or organizations as possible that reflect the population of the local district.

What do these groups do for conservation or education? Are they looking for additional speakers or education programs? Could their events serve as a vehicle for delivering the conservation message of the District? Who are key contacts for these groups? Write all this down.

The goal is to inform and educate effectively, not add to the workload of the District by duplicating efforts of other organizations. Some groups already serve the goals of the District and deserve acknowledgement and recognition for their work. This is an opportunity to build bridges of partnership and support. Submit these groups for awards and recognition through National Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts, Indiana Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts, Indiana Soil and Water Conservation Society and others.

Cluster the priorities whenever possible. Categories include: watershed management, soil erosion, wetlands, wastewater treatment, home site erosion control, backyard conservation, zoning issues, wildlife habitat, forestry, conservation tillage, conservation buffers, urban erosion control and soil quality. Create additional clusters as necessary.

Next, rank priorities from most important through least important. If you have questions on how to do this contact your District's Conservation Program Specialist.

STEP 3. IDENTIFY THE TARGET AUDIENCES FOR EACH PRIORITY

Establish the priorities and identify the target audience for each priority. That is, who needs to receive the educational information? Work with the most important issue and audience first. Then move to another issue and audience. Do not attempt to deliver all the messages to everyone in the county at the same time. Focus, deliver, measure impact and report success.

Audiences include landowners, farmers, non-agricultural land users, golf courses, contractors, developers, local government officials, school students, teachers, homeowners, homebuyers, local businesses, or others as determined by the committee. For most information, it is important to identify the target audience to determine the content and delivery method. Discuss secondary audiences. For example, if the primary audience is homebuyers, the secondary audience may be realtors.

Well-designed programs can fail because the message was directed at an unintended audience or was delivered in an ineffective manner. Remind committee members that not all priorities can be accomplished within one year. This is a process not an ending. There may be priorities that can only be accomplished in steps, over time. Take a seasonal approach similar to planting a crop or building a house.

STEP 4. CHARACTERIZE EACH TARGET AUDIENCE

Learn, know and understand the audience. This helps refine and focus the message for delivery. Key characteristics in characterizing each audience are: values, motivations (what motivates the audience to listen, learn and change), soil and water conservation interests, attitudes toward conservation, economic growth, lifestyle habits (where they shop, eat, play), work habits, and where their children attend school. Other characteristics include level of education, prior conservation training, age, available education resources, income level and disposable income, and community involvement.

In addition, list tools and methods for reaching each audience. These include existing events such as the county fair, school career fairs, field days, and community festivals. Methods for reaching the audience may include displays, bulletin boards, media spots, public access channels, billboards, and brochures. Non-traditional means may also provide opportunity. Consider a 5K

or 10K race or fun walk to deliver the message about conservation. The key is to draw upon the talent and interests of the committee members. Discover and use their passion to fuel the soil and water conservation education message.

STEP 5. ESTABLISH MEASURABLE OBJECTIVES

Establish measurable objectives for each audience. Short-term measurable objectives count the number of people attending a workshop or field day. Long-term measurable objectives document a change in behavior, attitude, and knowledge. The objectives vary for each audience, but are valuable to the committee in determining the impact of educational information. Generate meaningful reports to local and state governments to show the value of public monies invested in soil and water conservation.

Examples of short-term measurable objectives include the number of participants in a workshop or field day, number of brochures distributed at a community event, number of students receiving instruction at school conservation events, number of radio or television announcements, and billboard viewers. Long-term measurable objectives include observed changes in behavior, attitude, and knowledge over a longer period of time. This includes changes in local ordinances, waterways or conservation areas installed, data collected from Transect Tillage surveys, land use and zoning issues and soil and water quality studies, and actual county tax dollars saved in other departments because of sound best management practices installed.

These objectives should accompany the priorities set by the committee. The committee reviews objectives annually and reports to community leaders, funding sources, and District supervisors.

STEP 6. DESIGN EFFECTIVE INFORMATION AND EDUCATION ACTIVITIES

The committee determines the type and number of activities and events to reach target audiences. Even the best information is lost on the audience if it isn't presented in a manner that encourages the audience to use it at a later date. Staff in each field office can assist in determining the content with the committee. This step focuses on available methods of communicating information.

This step will fall into place with some creative thought. Essentially, an activity may be as simple as assembling an exhibit for the county fair, community festival, service club event or agricultural field day. Several types of exhibits are available from the Partnership agencies. The District may develop others as funding and creative resources permit.

Other activities include teacher workshops, information packets for teachers, summer Bible school lessons, road signs and conservation construction sites, presentations for community service clubs, and table-top displays at health fairs and school events. Many groups already hold activities in the community and are open to assistance from the District. They may be willing to allow the District staff and supervisors to participate with soil and water conservation information and education.

District staff are encouraged to meet with Extension Educators at least one time each year to plan education events, field days, and workshops. These can be conducted with multiple counties participating. Meetings throughout the year assess progress and redirect efforts where necessary. However, at any time, the committee may call upon the Purdue Agronomy Conservation

Program Specialist, the local Extension Educator, Indiana Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts, and the IDNR Division of Soil Conservation for assistance and guidance in accordance with IC-14-32 as outlined in the District Operations Manual.

STEP 7. DETERMINE CONSTRAINTS TO SUCCESS AND REMOVE BARRIERS

Every worthwhile goal has hurdles. Conservation is no exception. The committee can help anticipate constraints and obstacles. Constraints take many forms including lack of adequate funding, non-availability of qualified personnel, school protocol or policy, organization gatekeepers (secretaries, executive directors, officers, etc.), calendar conflicts, facilities, weather, and time.

Recognize constraints in advance to reduce, eliminate or deter setbacks and failures. For example, a spring field day for farmers may be a good idea. However, if a wet spring delays planting, the event may need postponed to allow farmers to finish planting. Consequently, the time of day may need adjusting to reach the audience. If the target audience is homeowners with septic systems consider holding a weekend “open house.” If these homeowners also have school age children, a Saturday morning program may conflict with soccer or baseball games. The committee may repeat events on the same priority to reach an extended audience in multiple communities. Remember, one field day will not reach everyone. The grant application cycle may take up to two years to initiate before funding is available. Previous experience recommends that grants written to cover multiple year projects are more successful.

STEP 8. IMPLEMENT AND EVALUATE PROGRESS

Evaluating progress allows the committee to adjust, refine or redirect priorities and objectives. Overall, this step is crucial to understanding and accomplishing short and long-range goals of the District. Critical steps and feedback used in Step 5 ensure long-term success and funding of District conservation efforts.

Several tools are available to determine progress and effectiveness. Remind committee members that with some priorities the measurable results may take months or years to achieve. There are several means of measuring the impact of educational events in the short term.

These measurements include scores on post-tests by workshop or field day participants, counting the number of participants in events or the number of requests for additional information about conservation practices following a series of newspaper articles, ads, or billboard displays.

Long term effects may be determined by analyzing tillage transect data, follow-up surveys six months to one year after a training workshop or improved working relationships among landowners, local conservation partners, local government agencies and officials. The committee may record news articles, ordinance changes, and improved practices by businesses and families as observed by an informal survey.

SUMMARY

Every citizen is responsible for soil conservation and water quality in the community. Often what is mistaken for indifference is really a lack of information or knowledge. The result is slack personal responsibility for soil and water conservation. Districts are charged with educating citizens about the importance of soil and water conservation. ***While this charge includes other***

natural resources and all audiences, the thrust of SWCD educational programming should focus on soil, water and related resources conservation.

Districts may promote informational and educational materials and activities based on wildlife protection or recycling, yet must make every effort to link these important activities to soil conservation, clean water, and quality of life for all citizens living in the District. Soil and water conservation is the most critical component of any and all natural resources conservation education events and activities. The District Education Committee supports this effort.

Individual members of the Education Committee are more than an advisory committee. Each member can participate in an education event or activity, or take an active role in these events during their term of service on the committee. Jump right in! Enthusiasm is greatly appreciated by the conservation professionals working in the District.

Formation of the District Education Committee is critical in making the best use of the limited resources of the local District. Efficiency is important where funding or staff may be limited. Include local government officials and other agencies in the education effort whenever possible.

Also, the District Education Committee can build strong relationships with key people in local government agencies and organizations. Work for the mutual benefit of everyone involved in the soil and water conservation process. This can require additional assistance from the Purdue and Division of Soil Conservation District Capacity Building Staff, Indiana Department of Natural Resources – Division of Soil Conservation, and the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, and the Indiana Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts, Inc. Every one is ready to serve the local staff and lend assistance to local programs where time, resources, and funding permit.

The purpose of the Soil and Water District is as essential today as it was 70 years ago.

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